Adult Learner Programs & Services Focus Groups
Spring 2014

Introduction
In order to explore the unique challenges Adult Learners face, including their academic experiences, participation in co-curricular activities, and interactions with traditional-aged students, Penn State’s office of Adult Learner Programs and Services (ALPS), in collaboration with Student Affairs Research and Assessment (SARA), conducted four student focus groups. The focus groups took place on February 17th, 2014 and were facilitated by key University administrators. The focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes and included a diverse population of 21 Adult Learners, including parents, veterans, and working professionals.

Methods
The four focus groups occurred concurrently in groups of 5-6 and were led by a facilitator who was aided by a note-taker. Facilitators were high-level University administrators chosen for their interest in Adult Learners. Before the discussion began, participants were asked to complete a brief survey to provide information on their participation in a variety of student services, their needs, and their perceptions of advising (see Appendix A). The focus group protocol provided a semi-structured framework for the discussion while allowing room to explore divergent topics (See Appendix B). Emergent themes from the responses were analyzed by SARA staff and the results of this analysis are reported below. Data from the survey are integrated into the focus group findings. Note that many of the themes and responses are consistent with the results from the 2013 focus groups.

Summary of Findings

Success for Adult Learners
The focus groups highlighted perceptions of success for Adult Learners. For most of the participants, success was correlated with graduation. Several participants noted it as the main signifier of success while others mentioned it with a number of other signifiers including: GPA, getting a job after graduation, and taking advantage of services on campus. Other students defined success in more broad terms of “meeting goals.” For some students success is connected to being a positive role model by finishing their degree, “I already have a job and have some success, but it's finishing and being an example to my kids that I can finish.” While many Adult Learners spoke positively about the idea of getting involved outside of the classroom, clubs and organizations are not priorities for these students who are very goal oriented.

Orientation Experience
Students in the focus groups talked in depth about feeling as though orientation was not geared toward them. They described the content of orientation as being geared exclusively toward traditional aged students and having very little information relevant to them. Most of the Adult Learners live off campus and felt as though orientation had a focus on students who would be living in the residence halls. Some participants explained that they had to take initiative in order to prepare themselves for their transition to Penn State because they did not receive support from orientation. The lack of pertinent information available to Adult Learners during orientation pushed these students to seek out advising and support
on their own. 83% of survey responses show that students would want to have an Adult Learner or Veterans orientation day.

It is also important to mention that several Adult Learners said they did not know about orientation at all. Survey responses show that 60% of these students attend an orientation and 40% did not attend an orientation. These students said they had no previous knowledge about orientation and found out about it only recently. One participant said “I wish I would have known about that program.” Other students said they never participated in an orientation but they did not give a reason as to why. Some students also mentioned the importance of having an orientation specific to Veterans and Adult Learners.

**Campus Programs**

When asked about programs that Adult Learners would be motivated to attend, the majority of participants talked about career related programming. They talked about the importance of attending programs that would help them achieve their goals. One student suggested programming in which Adult Learners could meet alumni and gain perspective on future careers. Many of the students agreed that programs that helped them find jobs in the future would be worth their time.

Another prominent theme in the focus groups was the desire for clubs or Greek organizations for Veterans and Adult Learners. A participant in the focus group gave the suggestion of having a club fair specifically for Adult Learners in which representatives from different organizations could talk about involvement opportunities. Other participants talked about needing representation on the student government. There was also some confusion in the groups about whether or not adult students could participate in clubs and organizations, which may be an indicator that there is a disconnect between this population and involvement opportunities on campus.

**Classroom Experiences and Interactions with Faculty and Advisers**

Adult learners in the focus groups generally discussed positive interactions with faculty members, with only a couple indications that it was difficult to reach or meet with faculty. This statement from a participant is an example of attitudes about faculty interactions from the focus groups, “Faculty are understanding and flexible.” Several participants said they felt that faculty were truly interested in helping them and learning about their needs. Some students discussed faculty in terms of two categories: helpful/friendly or professional/closed off. Participants explained these categories as one group of faculty who go out of their way to help and another group of faculty who will provide assistance if you approach them and ask for something specific.

Some participants mentioned discomfort with having instructors who were younger than them or seemed to have only little experience. These students noted that they felt they had to go out of their comfort zones to be able to communicate and connect with instructors who were their same age or younger. They also more generally discussed needing to be intentional about talking to professors regularly in order to ensure the professor knew their names and would respond to their inquiries.

Students in the focus groups provided positive feedback about their interactions with advisors for the most part. Statements like “Generally speaking advisors have been great,” were common throughout focus groups. However the focus groups did offer some critiques of advising they received in financial aid, career services and the colleges when it came to getting guidance about issues specific to them as Adult Learners. One student shared their experience, “My first interaction with my advisor wasn't the best. I had expressed my interest with my advisor who was doing research in what I wanted to do and
she told me to go find another advisor. I just haven’t gone back to her since then.” Some students interpreted this issue as staff and faculty just not knowing how to work with Adult Learners.

**Barriers to Engaged Scholarship**
Focus group participants were asked about their willingness to participate in internships, undergraduate research, and study abroad opportunities. Adult Learners shared their desire to participate in these kinds of opportunities, but named barriers that keep them from being able to do so. Of the 21 students surveyed, 76% of respondents said they would like to participate in an education abroad or internship opportunity before graduating. Many of the participants in the focus groups said they do not often hear about opportunities for internships, research, or study abroad. They named informal networks for hearing about opportunities; either through family or friends. One student also said they had received one announcement from their college but that was it. The overall perception of the focus groups was that these opportunities are not well advertised or promoted to Adult Learners.

Adult Learners also discussed a second barrier to taking part in research, internships, and study abroad opportunities related to time and resources. Many Adult Learners already have to balance multiple commitments with family, school, and jobs. The students in the focus groups talked about the difficulty of trying to add on another commitment to the many commitments they already have to balance. In particular, many students discussed the financial constraints to getting involved. Since most of the students have to work, they do not have the ability to take an unpaid internship or cut hours from their jobs in order to do research. Some students in the focus groups mentioned that they would need additional financial assistance in order to be able to participate in activities such as study abroad. A student in one focus group explained that the cost of some of these opportunities is more than they would be able to manage, “It’s so hard to pay $3000-$4000 for a few weeks of a program.” Overall the focus groups asserted that financial support would be needed in order to take advantage of internships, research, or study abroad opportunities.

**Center for Adult Learners**
One of the topics the focus groups spent time on was gathering feedback about a space for Adult Learners. When asked whether or not they knew about the current stay and study space in Boucke, only 43% of students responded yes. In the focus groups, participants provide some ideas about how this space could be improved, but they also included services that would be helpful to have at a center specific to Adult Learners and Veterans. Students discussed accessibility of the space and making it a welcoming and comfortable space. There were some opposing ideas about whether this space should be a social environment or a quiet study area. Some students said it, “Has to have quiet spaces to be with computers and printers and area to rest.” While other students said, “It would be good to have a place to connect.” Beyond just a stay and study spot, students suggested that the space also provide services that were unique to the needs of Adult Learners and Veterans. Participants mentioned providing career services, counseling services, and programming at this location and making it into a “one stop shop.” Students indicated in these conversations that if a place like this existed they would utilize it.

**Implications**

The results from the 2014 focus groups reinforce the results from the 2013 focus groups. This report particularly highlights the need for campus services that are directed toward Adult Learners and Veterans. It may be worthwhile to consider how programs like Orientation could be tailored for Adult Learners and Veterans. Campus programming must be intentional about being inclusive of Adult
Learners and Veterans. The content and activities of a lot of current campus programs do not appeal to the students represented by these focus groups.

Also evident in the results is that additional training about Adult Learners and Veterans for staff in various service units may be useful. Trainings for career services, financial aid and counseling services could help improve the student experience and ensure that these students are getting what they need. Results from the survey indicate that this training may be especially needed for staff advising students about financial resources. Many of the participants were unaware of financial resources and/or had a negative experience with financial advising on campus.

Similar to the 2013 report, students are still reporting that they are not receiving information about involvement, internship, research, and study abroad opportunities. In future surveys it may also be worthwhile to ask students about the best modes of information delivery. Assessing the effectiveness of various communication strategies with adult learners may help with this concern.

The results regarding faculty are encouraging. While students expressed some difficulty in connecting with faculty, the general indication was that faculty members are sensitive to the unique needs and concerns of adult learners. While a majority of students were satisfied with their advising, there were students who shared negative experiences from advising meetings. Efforts to communicate to academic advisers how adult learners’ needs and circumstances differ from traditional students should be evaluated. Strengthening partnerships with academic advising may be a key benefit to adult learners moving forward.
## Appendix A – Preliminary Survey Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As a new student:*</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Did you attend FTCAP, the First-Year Testing, Counseling, and Advising Program?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Did you attend an orientation program?</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Did you attend an open house?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Were you informed about Adult Learner Programs?</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Were you informed about the Office of Veterans Programs?</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some participants indicated “not applicable” on these questions (Q1 n=1, Q2 n=1, Q3 n=1, Q4 n=1, and Q5 n=2). Not applicable responses are not included in the percentages reported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Are you aware of:</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. The Adult Learner Handbook online posted on the adult learner website?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How to locate financial scholarships designated for adult learners and student veterans?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. How to locate information regarding the child care subsidy?*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. The Stay and Study Space located in Boucke 203?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Supplemental instruction and tutorial services offered by Penn State Learning located in Boucke, Sparks, and Wagner buildings?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some participants indicated “not applicable” on Q8 (n=11). Not applicable responses are not included in the percentages reported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you ever:</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. Used supplemental instruction and tutorial services offered by Penn State Learning located in Boucke, Sparks, and Wagner buildings?</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Attended an adult learner event (open house, game night or workshop)?</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Attended the annual Outstanding Adult Student Award Reception?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Would you like:*</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14. To have a designated adult learner or student veteran orientation day?</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. To see campus publications emphasize a commitment to serving adult learners?</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some participants indicated “not applicable” on these questions (Q14 n=3, Q15 n=3). Not applicable responses are not included in the percentages reported.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16. Are you aware of the campus commissions:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Commission for Women*</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Commission on LGBT Equity</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Commission on Racial/Ethnic Diversity (CORED)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Commission for Adult Learners</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Do you feel that faculty and staff recognize the special needs and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circumstances that adult students face?</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some participants indicated “not applicable” on these questions (Q16.1 n=1, Q17 n=2). Not applicable responses are not included in the percentages reported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>LOW</th>
<th>MED</th>
<th>HIGH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18. What is your level of expertise when it comes to technology?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19. Do you use Facebook?**</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Have you used the ITS services for students?</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Have you used free online video tutorials at Lynda.com?</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Have you participated in any campus-related volunteer opportunities?</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Would you like to participate in an education abroad or internship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opportunity before graduating?</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some participants indicated “not applicable” on Q19 (n=1). Not applicable responses are not included in the percentages reported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Face-to-face</th>
<th>Email/Online</th>
<th>Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27. Do you utilize an adviser via face-to-face, email or online for</td>
<td>7 (35%)</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>11 (55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>selecting classes?*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. How satisfied are you with your adviser?</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>7 (33%)</td>
<td>14 (67%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some participants indicated “not applicable” on Q27 (n=1). Not applicable responses are not included in the percentages reported.
Open-Ended Items

If you are a veteran, have enrolled and utilized priority registration? How can we increase awareness and/or improve the process?

- Enrolled-The email sent out and mailing seems to work
- Vet office should enrolled students in the priority registration program
- No but even this semester, send out mass email
- I have used priority registration. I don't know any other veterans/adult learners on campus. I am unaware of any clubs or other resources and I would love to hear about more. Emails from a veteran liaison?
- Publicize on web, flyers, CE events
- Yes!!! This program "saved my butt" this semester! I would hope that all Adult Learners at Penn State read the emails that Leslie sends out, because I feel that this would be the best way to reach the most people.
- I have not used priority registration as I was not aware that I had that option.
- Email distribution list. I was not informed until I was in the VA Office. They told me about it face to face. Very helpful.

What types of cultural programs or experiences have you had as a Penn State student?

- Mostly just interaction with students from a variety of places, countries, etc.
- Interestingly, one of the few undergraduate students who I actually keep in touch with from previous classes is from Dubai. This is not surprising to me, however some people think this would be unusual.
- German Club, Tea Club, Meditation & Buddhist Group
- I am active with Phi Gamma Delta (FIJI) my fraternity. Also, my wife works for PSU and I access many experiences. In addition, I have many friends on faculty & staff introducing me as well.
- I don't go to many programs due to time restraint.
- Distinguished speakers' series, various concerts from jazz, hip-hop, to classical and dances of every kind.

What types of assistance would you like to receive regarding transitioning to a new career?

- I feel pretty confident that I will be able to transition fairly easily. I have been transient over the years as my spouse was in the military.
- Workshops, 1 on 1, mentoring, access to reliable self-serve info
- Maybe a separate "Career Fair" type of thing for adult students - I find it hard to explain myself as far as where I've been, what I've done, my "status" as a student, etc.
- Internship
- I have participated in the Transition Program - more people should be aware of this experience
- Just orgs related to veterans i.e. Veterans on Wallstreet etc.
• I don't quite require assistance on any aspect thus far, except with maybe some networking in order to increase chances for an internship.
• Resume building, intern, scholarship, and grant opportunities.
• Accept more transfer credits, create a listserv of paid internships geared to Adult/veteran learners who want the job experience but cannot financially afford to take a whole summer off without getting paid
• More information on what's out there, and resources to use
• None at this time but resume assistance to relay veteran/education experience
• Nothing that is not already offered/available comes to mind.
• Job placement assistance
• Employer connection
• More interactions such as these
• Everything from new ways of digitalizing work portfolios, resumes, & creative internships

What types of advising challenges do you face?
• Used to have trouble getting advisors to understand different needs/values of non-traditional student
• The entire SHIELDS Building is a challenge. Having to fill out SAP forms, which does not allow for any leeway as far as choosing classes. Also my degree audits are out of date. The minor requirements for Technical Writing are non-applicable. (The classes are not offered)
• Haven't been informed of who my advisor is.
• The time & distance required to speak w/ my advisor located in the outreach building, being unsure of the next classes to take w/ out asking my advisor for best choices
• Playing catch-up from military
• Transfer evaluation --> Evaluating and direct transfers.
• Adviser isn't too aware of opportunities for students.
• Finding scholarships and grants.
• Creating the next semester's schedule that has a balanced work load.
• Class sizes
• Completing degree in 2015
• I am "behind the curve" compared to students in similar semester standing. I am playing catchup by taking additional classes like MATH 014, Bio 100, and CHEM101. Most sophomores in my major skipped these classes altogether, and already took a language in High School.
• College of Education offers very few summer courses that I need, which is slowing down my goals of graduating as soon as possible.
• Matching my availability to hers. Mary Mark @ UP is THE BEST
• Dana Aina @ WORLD is THE BEST
• Time restraints since teach does a few classes & is usually available for me when I'm in classes.
• Foggy requirements to multiple graduate schools. Making sure to meet all requirements to apply to multiple graduate schools.
• Trying to match up classes from other colleges instead of simply repeating courses
What criteria do you think should be used in selecting the Outstanding Adult Student Award recipient?

First Response
- Balance between personal life and college life. Hardships or challenges faced.
- Demonstrated academic excellence or commitment or sound improvement.
- Does the student represent his- or herself as a role model for other adult/veteran student?
- Extra-curriculars
- Volunteering
- GPA
- Volunteering --> Serving your community
- Background of student & challenges currently or past they face.
- Active in the community
- Education standing - with no min. credits
- Overcoming adversity to return to learning or start.
- Type of classes taken when doing GPA because some classes are nearly impossible to get a B-.

Second Response
- Involvement (school, community, vets programs)
- Has the student overcome any kind of hardship while pursuing his/her degree?
- GPA
- Associations
- Volunteer opps/charity
- Grades - someone must be proving themselves in the classroom. 3.0+
- Difficulties the student tackled in order to graduate
- How they are participating to the university & community
- Community service
- Shows great leadership in and out of the classroom
- Background on student
- Professionalism
- Activity at PSU
- Mentoring impact

Third Response
- Grades
- Does the student have a strong outlook on his/her future?
- Volunteer involvement
- Being involved with the University as far as sports - clubs - and other activities
- Staff/Faculty recommendation
- Good role model
- Goals
- Outside campus activities and leadership
Appendix B – Focus Group Protocol

1. Would you share your Penn State orientation experience?

2. Given your challenges, family commitments, work obligations and limited time as a student at Penn State, what sort of programs would motivate you to take time out to participate?

3. How would you describe a successful student experience at Penn State? How can the university’s services and programs be improved to provide you with that experience?

4. Describe your typical interactions with Penn State faculty, advisors or staff members?

5. There are many research, internship and education abroad opportunities at Penn State, how can we best promote these to you and what additional support would you need in order to participate?

6. We have multiple delivery systems for course instruction, describe your classroom experiences. Have you taken an online course or a hybrid course? What was that experience like for you? What are your thoughts about taking courses in this format?

7. New students at Penn State are required to quickly learn how to use elion, angel, webmail and other learning and technologies. What additional technology training would be most useful to you?

8. It is important to us that adult and veteran students feel a part of the Penn State community and develop a sense of belonging. Would you share with us recommendations for improving or establishing a sense of community?

9. There are over 900 student organizations on campus but only three are specific to adult and veteran students, are you affiliated with these organizations?

10. We know that some adult and veteran students have expressed a desire to have their own stay & study spaces on campus, what are your thoughts about such a place?

11. What other university programs and services have you used? Tell us about that experience.

12. What other things would you like to share with us about your Penn State experiences?

13. Do you have questions for us?